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Pregnant at Work

By Denise Schipani

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Telling Coworkers & Devising a Plan

Start Spreading the News

You're pregnant. You're thrilled. You come in to work and...what do you do? Tell your coworkers in confidence? Wait until you can't zip your skirt before telling your boss? "If you're feeling fine and can hide the pregnancy, wait until you're past the threat of miscarriage before you tell anyone," advises Laura Lorenzen, director of global recruitment for Capital One Financial. "That way you're not in an awkward spot if something terrible happens." But if you've got morning sickness or other pregnancy complications, it's wise to come clean sooner.

And while the timing of your announcement depends on your situation, your boss should get the news first, from you -- not via water-cooler gossip. "Telling your boss first is more about preserving your relationship with her than about arranging your leave," says Brette Sember, author of *Your Practical Pregnancy Planner: A Month-by-Month Guide to All Financial and Legal Aspects of Preparing for Your Baby* (McGraw-Hill, 2005). Once you have that hurdle out of the way, it's time to research your legal rights and your benefits package at your company -- and to figure out what you want to do. Consider all of your feelings surrounding the subject of returning to work: Will you? Won't you? Do you have to? Give yourself time and space to figure out what's the best move for you and your family.

Your Rights, Your Plans

When you are ready to discuss your plans, do so with plenty of information on your side. Consult your human resources department to find out if your company offers paid maternity leave and/or disability insurance. Some companies offer this type of insurance, which will extend the paid portion of your leave. Some states (California, Hawaii, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island) have mandatory disability programs, says Sember. You should also find out whether you can tack accrued vacation or sick time onto your leave; some companies require that you use this time as part of your leave.

Next, talk to coworkers. Get the scuttlebutt on what others have been offered. Even if something's not official policy, if your company has offered a twist on maternity leave before, such as letting someone return on a modified schedule for a

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while, they may be amenable to doing so again. The law may be on your side; companies that have offered one worker a certain perk may not be legally able to deny you the same.

Armed with this information, devise an action plan. This should include what you know you're entitled to (job protection, benefits) and what you believe your company can offer you (a certain number of paid weeks, the possibility of a flexible schedule later). It should also include concrete ideas on how you will handle the transitions of leaving and returning to work. Your employer will appreciate your efforts to finish or farm out projects, and that goodwill may buy you some wiggle room later.

Even now, as you're discussing the nitty-gritty, you still don't have to commit to such things as your last working date or your actual return date. Again, as the months pass, you may change your mind, or your physical situation may alter your plans. You may find you have to dip into maternity leave thanks to doctor-mandated bed rest, for example. Conversely, even if you thought you'd start your leave early to rest up at home, you may decide you want to work right up to labor day. These dates can and should be flexible.

▪ What You Need to Know While on Leave

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